



Signs of Life



Wildlife in the Desert

Saguaro National Park is a unique area with a wide diversity of plant and animal species. Biotic communities, or life zones, range from low desert scrub at 2,500 feet to a mixed conifer forest at 8,600 feet in elevation. While traveling through the cactus forest of the park, you will see an incredible assortment of plant life. Birds and insects are readily seen, but sightings of other

animals are not as common. Wild animals are shy, and do their best to avoid people. Many desert animals are nocturnal and spend the daytime in burrows to escape predators and extreme temperatures. Most desert wildlife is well camouflaged and can be very hard to spot, even from a short distance.

What to Look For

Although you may not actually see wildlife along the trail, there are many signs you can look for that indicate animals have been in the area such as nests, droppings, gnawings, rubbings, scratchings or burrows. While some of these signs are quite obvious, you may have to look carefully to find others. Here are a few things to look for:

Prickly Pear Cactus

Prickly pear cactus are eaten by many desert animals because of the high moisture content. Look for small bites on the edge of the pads. These are usually made by packrats or other rodents. Shredded cactus pads are usually the result of the javelina. Small holes within the pads may indicate the presence of the long-horned beetle.

Packrat Nests

Large piles of branches and cactus pieces piled within prickly pear patches usually indicate the presence of a packrat. These large, common desert rodents are active at night.

Bird Nests

The saguaro cactus is a common nesting site for the Gila woodpecker and the gilded flicker. Look for holes in the main stem or the arms. During the summer months, these nests are often inhabited by elf owls.

Cactus wren and curve-billed thrasher nests are commonly found in the cholla cactus, or in palo verde or mesquite trees.

Scat

Many animals can be identified by studying their droppings or scat, some of which can be found along park trails. Small round pellets may indicate a rabbit or jackrabbit. Slightly larger pellets may indicate a deer. Scat with both plant and animal remains is likely from a coyote. Medium to large droppings shaped like a tootsie roll are indicative of the cat family and may be either bobcat or mountain lion.

Burrows

A large number of desert animals make their homes underground including spiders, ground squirrels, kangaroo rats, snakes and insects. Underground homes are a great way to beat the heat of summer or to safely spend a winter hibernating. Some of the most conspicuous holes are from tarantulas. Look for vertical, quarter- sized holes with strands of spider’s silk around the edges. Banner-tailed kangaroo rat burrows often have large mounds of soil over their extensive system of underground passageways.

Animal Tracks

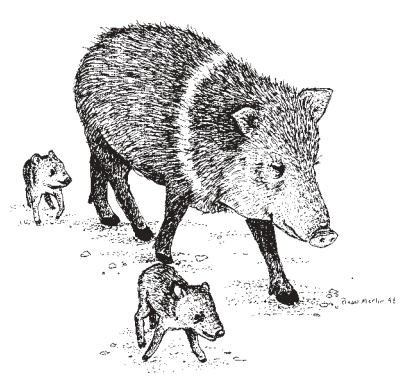
The most frequently seen sign of animals is the tracks they leave behind. Reading tracks is not always easy. By taking your time and searching carefully, you can find a variety of tracks

throughout the park. Here are a few examples of animal tracks frequently found in the park. We hope that this information will help you get started in your search for “signs of life”.



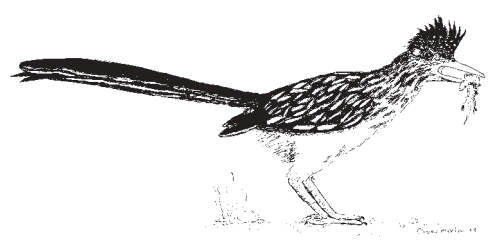
Coyote

The coyote is a commonly seen mammal in the park, and it frequently leaves scat on trails and roads. Coyotes use scat and urine as a way of marking their territories. Their diet primarily consists of rodents, insects and plant parts, such as seeds and fruits.



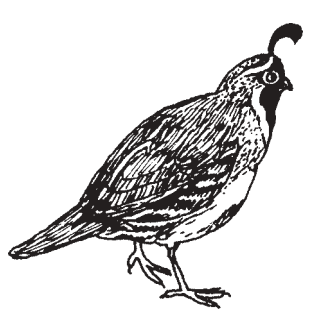
Javelina

The javelina is a fairly common desert animal, which travels in herds of 2 to 30 animals. While they may resemble a wild pig, javelina are members of the peccary family. The fruit and pads of the prickly pear make up much of the javelina’s diet.



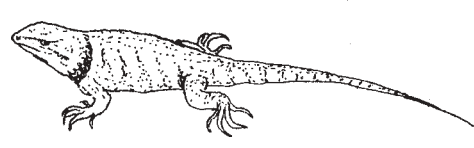
Roadrunner

While this desert bird can fly, it usually prefers to run and can reach a top speed of 18 miles per hour. It has a long tail, a streaked appearance and a shaggy crest. The roadrunner feeds primarily on insects, lizards, rodents and snakes.



Gambel’s Quail

Gambel’s Quail are one of the easiest desert birds to identify. Look for its large topknot of feathers protruding from the heads of both male and female quail. In the fall, large coveys can be seen feeding on seeds, especially from grasses.



Desert Spiny Lizard

Many species of lizards live in the Sonoran Desert. Several of the most common in the park include the zebra-tailed, whiptail and desert spiny lizards.